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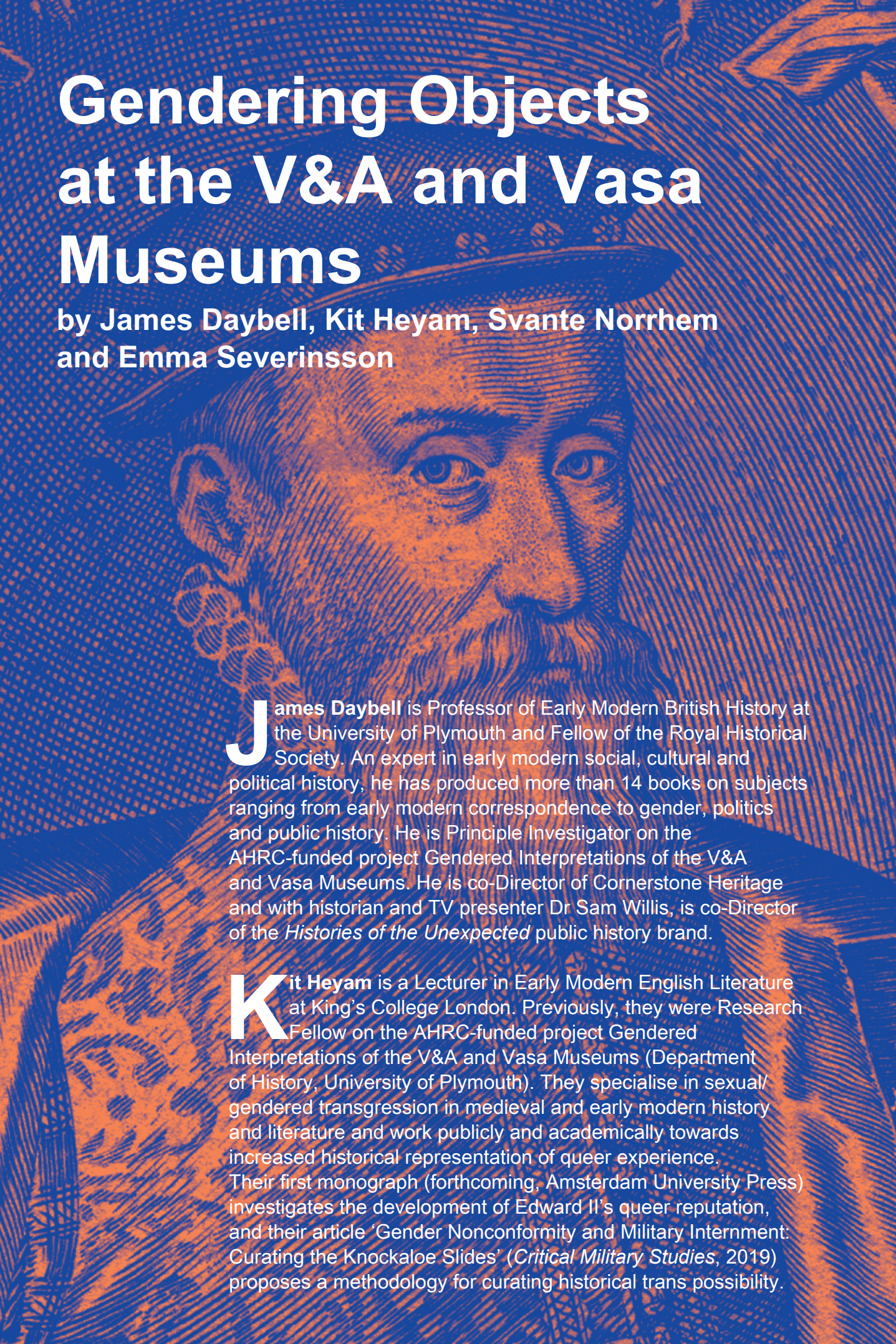


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# Gendering Objects at the V&A and Vasa Museums

by James Daybell, Kit Heyam, Svante Norrhem  
and Emma Severinsson

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The question of how to raise awareness of the many gendered histories hidden behind museum objects has created an interest in finding new methods of approaching this problem.

This article is based on a research undertaken as part of a series of international collaborative projects, which collectively have raised awareness of gender as an important interpretative category in museology, developed a gendered interpretative tool, and applied it in the context of two major international museums, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London and the Vasa Museum in Stockholm.<sup>1</sup> Museums are powerful cultural centres for individuals and communities to undertake life-long learning and foster behavioural change. Through a process of co-production, the project team, which included researchers and professionals from these two international beacon institutions, sought to better integrate gender into narratives of the past and present. At the root of this project is a belief that narratives of the past are fundamental to people's sense of self, community and identity—and thus it is imperative that these narratives be diverse, and that this diversity be reflected in a variety of sites where narratives are made (Falk 2013; Watson 2007; MacDonald 2006; Fyfe 1995).

Museums are reorganising themselves to be well-placed to engage with new and diverse audiences in order to represent multiple narratives. An awareness of gender (which encompasses women and men, femininities and masculinities, sexualities and identities) is crucially important here (Sandell *et al.* 2010; Adair and Levin 2020; Swedish Exhibition Agency 2015). However, while many museums have identified a need to better integrate gender into their interpretative pathways and curatorial practices, the question of how to raise awareness—often with limited financial resources—of the many gendered histories hidden behind museum objects has created an interest in finding new methods of approaching this problem (see *e.g.* Adair and Levin 2020; Anderson and Winkworth 2014; Callihan and Feldman 2018; Grah 2006 and 2007; Grundberg 2014; Laskar 2019; Ruiz 2018).

Gender as deployed here is not only an analytical category and interpretative framework as it relates to objects, curation and interpretation. We also view a gendered approach to education and the visitor experience as a positive way of providing a more nuanced and accurate history, and making visible power, exclusion and impact in any given society. This article argues that the application of gendered historiographical analysis has the demonstrable potential to facilitate new gendered perspectives on museum objects, leading to more deep and diverse representation of gender in curation and interpretation. Furthermore, this transformation of curatorial and interpretative practice can lead to increased engagement from audiences marginalised by their gender and/or sexuality. In doing so, it builds on a range of studies that have demonstrated the value for audience engagement of representing marginalised histories in museum interpretation (Porter 1995; Mills 2006; Remoaldo *et al.* 2014; Dodd *et al.* 2010; Delin 2002). Research on gender and objects is similarly enriched by being undertaken within a museum context, since its import is extended to museum interpretation and the institutional processes of cataloguing, curation and display, as well as to the consumption, experience and engagement of visitors.

This thinking about gendered museum interpretation was initially shaped during a two-year project involving an international research network, which generated dialogue between four university nodes (University of Plymouth, Lund University, Leiden University and University of Western Australia) and curators and the Research Department at the V&A, as well as professionals at Skarhult Castle, Sweden, the Museum of London, the Worshipful Company of Glovers, Powderham Castle in Devon, Catherijne Convent in Utrecht and Cultural Heritage Leiden. Through a series of workshops held from 2015 to 2017, an interpretative methodology was developed for understanding objects, exhibitions and the past through the lens of gender, power and materiality as important power constellations that affected the

design, form and function of objects, building on the work of scholars interested in gender, power and materiality in the early modern period (Styles and Vickery 2007; Richardson and Hamling 2017; Whittle and Griffiths 2009). This methodology was used to study the gendered history of gloves across their lifecycle from commission and manufacture to consumption and display in a museum (Daybell *et al.* forthcoming).

This first phase of the project worked to raise awareness of gender as an important interpretative category in curatorial practice and the significant role this can play in generating diverse narratives. These narratives can then have wider societal impact when disseminated through interpretation, as well as educational and public programming for

schools and the general public. Studied from the perspective of gender, our research offers possibilities of obtaining a thicker description of objects capable of enhancing the visitor experience, as part of a museum's strategies to bring audiences back for revisits, and also of helping to stimulate behavioural change relating to gender and diverse experiences.

The second phase of the project sought to develop and implement this interpretative methodology in a museum environment, working with existing partners at the V&A and a new partner, the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, to develop new pathways to knowledge exchange and a methodology, which offers museums the opportunity to change their practices. In so doing, the project brought together two very different museums as



a way of facilitating international exchange. The V&A, as a world-leading design museum with a vast collection and 4.3 million visitors in 2018-19, is a very different kind of museum from the Vasa, one of Sweden's most popular museums, with 1.5 million visitors recorded in 2019. Built around the magnificent wreck of Gustavus Adolphus's 17th century warship, the Vasa is effectively a single-object military museum, and outwardly, at least, appeared more difficult to gender. In both institutions, however, the project was enabled by directors of research, curators and other staff who were sensitive to gender as an interpretative category. At the V&A, the LGBTQ network was an invaluable collaborator, and the Vasa Museum as a whole was already significantly advanced in gendering its collections, as evidenced by the pioneering exhibition, *Vasa's Women*.

At the heart of this project was the identification and analysis of a selection of 10-20 objects at both museums by the project teams in the UK and Sweden in order to unlock their gendered narratives. This phase of research employed the new gendered interpretative methodology for understanding objects. As a result of our research, each object has a two-page biography/narrative, which identifies gender as one of a cluster of determinants that inform its existence and meaning. The interpretative materials our research generated will be used at the museums in the longer term for signage and pathways, for pedagogical materials that will be embedded into education literature and programmes, in guidebooks and tour guide manuals, and in frameworks for public workshops and podcasts. In particular, findings from the project have achieved a global reach through dissemination via the *Histories of the Unexpected* podcast, which is co-produced by project co-director James Daybell with the TV presenter

and historian Sam Willis, which has had nearly two million downloads in more than 150 countries around the world.

A further key output of the project was the facilitation of the conceptual implications of gendered interpretative pathways exchanged between international partner institutions, achieved by holding two workshops in London and Stockholm with the project team and museum practice professionals (curators, cataloguers, conservators, education and outreach officers, and public programmers), as well as a series of public engagement activities at both museums (public talks, gendered pathway tours, up-close-and-personal sessions with the objects, the V&A's Friday Late night and curatorial symposia). As a result of these workshops and activities, a final report with recommendations for how to create gendered interpretative pathways for use in other museums is being produced.

## 'Gendering objects' methodology

The methodology developed to gender objects analytically reflected a threefold aim: to make visible the gendered aspects that made an object meaningful to early modern people; to recover the gendered impact and significance of the object in its broadest sense, within and beyond the society it was made for; and to provide a means of diversifying gendered representation within the museum. Consequently, the objects were approached with a set of research questions to contextualise them broadly and investigate the gendering of the following:

- Materiality: the raw materials of the object, the role of different genders in sourcing them, and the impact of sourcing these materials on the gender dynamics of the societies involved.
- Production: who made the object, and what gendered rules or conventions (such as guild membership structures) governed this process, including whether anyone is known to have transgressed them.
- Use: who, in a gendered sense, the object was made for, and how it was used—including whether the object was implicated in gendered rituals,

transactions or gestures, and whether different genders were perceived differently when using it.

- Design: how any design elements—particularly those with classical or other narrative allusions—affected the way the object was gendered.
- Interpretation: turning our lens on curatorial and historiographical practice, we asked what gendered assumptions had been made about the object; how those assumptions were ideologically informed; and how, and in what context, a specific object was presented to the audience.

Essential to this methodology was an approach less biographical than prosopographical; that is, focusing not on the biography of a single object, but on what can be determined about objects of that type or material makeup (Daybell *et al.* forthcoming). This meant that the research was informed by the specific circumstances of the object, but was not limited by them. This has important implications for the transferable applicability of the methodology; the broad set of research questions can be applied to any museum object, including one whose collection records are sparse.

Objects at the two museums were selected to exemplify the breadth of the methodology across the museums' collections, both in terms of geography, establishing the methodology's utility for objects made and used outside of Western Europe, and in terms of object type, moving beyond clothing to include ceramics, games and medical apparatus. For this article, two hats were chosen as case studies since this particular type of object exists in both museums. As well as allowing for cross-institutional comparison, hats in themselves are a particularly good example of the potential of gendering museum objects, since they demonstrate how the methodology uncovered meaningful gendered history at each stage of the research process outlined above. Additionally, the case of hats shows the importance of this methodology not just for recovering the gendered meanings of objects in their historical context, but for making visible marginalised gendered histories. These case studies also indicate the implications of gendered analysis for curation and interpretation. The ways in which these implications have been implemented at the V&A and Vasa, and might be implemented further, are detailed in the conclusion.





Fig. 1. Knitted and felted wool cap, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1562&A-1901.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

### Case Study 1: The V&A hat

Displayed alongside other dress accessories in the museum's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, object 1562&A-1901 at the V&A is a flat cap made in 16th century England (Fig. 1). Made from knitted and felted wool and worn as an everyday item of clothing by men below the rank of gentleman, this cap is one of 14 similar hats held by the V&A thanks to the 1571 Cappers' Act. Described later as an 'Act made for the Continuance of making of Caps', this act mandated the wearing of 'a Cap of Wool knit, thicked and dressed in *England*, made within this Realm, and only dressed and finished by some of the Trade of Cappers' on Sundays and holidays' (Ruffhead 1763, p. 600). It extended to 'Every Person above the Age of seven Years [...] Except Maids, Ladies, Gentlewomen', and aristocratic men, clerics, and the wardens of London livery companies. This phrasing, which notably refers not to 'men' but to 'Every Person [...] except [women]'; is a pertinent example of what Hilda Smith has termed early modern 'false universal' discourse, in which 'man' is conflated with 'human' (Smith 2002, p. x). This discourse has important implications for both curatorial and historiographical methodology; as Smith argues:

*Although we are most apt to think the greatest potential for excluding women is their simple omission, in reality, thought patterns and popular expressions that encourage the visual and linguistic linkage of men [and, we would add, other dominant groups such as white or heterosexual people] to the universal human condition are more significant* (2002, p. 13).

Smith's observations concerning the pervasiveness of 'false universal' discourse are also useful in framing an investigation into the role of women and girls as apprentice cappers and members of cappers' guilds. Women, Smith suggests, are less likely to be identified by their occupation (such as 'weaver') in early modern documents, but are instead identified 'as a wife or widow with a descriptor indicating that she wove'; consequently, this discursive practice has led historians to underestimate the role of women in guilds (Smith 2002, pp. 14, 83-4). Equally, as Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos has shown, apprenticeships and guild memberships provide only a partial view of how girls and women acquired skills, since their training was far more likely to have been informal or combined with domestic work (Smith 2002, pp. 45-46; Ben-Amos 1994, p. 146). Hence, when Ben-Amos discovered women apprenticed as housewives in the households of cappers in early 16th century Bristol, it is possible that some of these women acquired skills in capping and contributed to the family trade (Ben-Amos 1991, pp. 229-30). Ben-Amos also identifies both female apprentices and widows working in felt-making, a craft important to hat production (Ben-Amos 1991, pp. 238, 243). While these women might not have been defined as cappers or felt-makers in early modern discourse, it is clear that female labour contributed to hat manufacture.

This is made most visible when considering the earliest stages of hat-making and the material makeup of the V&A's woollen cap. Women's work, along with that of children, was central to the early modern English wool industry (Muldrew 2012; Oldland 2018, p. 7). Women owned and bequeathed sheep (Fudge 2013, pp. 190-91); were employed

as shearers, for which they were paid about 16% less than men (Clark 1919, p. 62); and, above all, spun wool for a small, barely liveable wage (Clark 1919, p. 95; Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 104). Moreover, spinning was ideologically 'defined [...] as women's work', and women's spinning—regardless of their economic class—was 'praised as evidence of chaste industriousness' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 104). The V&A's woollen cap has the potential to function metonymically within the museum, standing for and calling attention to the contribution of these largely anonymous working women from lower social orders to the material construction of any objects in its collections containing wool. Jones and Stallybrass's research on early modern wool also illustrates the importance of looking beyond documentary evidence of work and trade when gendering objects and the value of literary sources as evidence of the gendered discourse surrounding particular objects or activities.

Moreover, a gendered analysis of how caps like this were worn reveals more than women's history. As outlined above, the 1571 Cappers' Act circumscribed hats like the V&A cap as headwear for men from the citizen class; this social delineation reflects the role of headwear as an index of status (Hayward 2002, p. 1; Postles 2008, pp. 4-5). Additionally, however, headwear functioned as an index of gender. For numerous early modern commentators, gender was apparently 'proclaimed through the visibility of the head' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 79), and anxieties about gender nonconformity were frequently articulated with reference to headwear. In particular, people assigned female at birth who wore male-coded hats—as opposed to a female-coded hood or coif (Mikhaila and Malcolm-Davies 2006, p. 28)—were used as synecdoche for concerns about gender nonconforming fashion more broadly. The clergyman Thomas Stoughton inveighed in his 1622 tract *The Christians Sacrifice* against those who had 'changed their sex', exemplified by 'men wearing long haire like unto women, and women cutting off their haire like unto boyes, or beardlesse yong men, wearing nothing thereon but hats, putting them also off to such as they meete' (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 79). Stoughton's gender transgressors were not only wearing the wrong headwear, but using that



headwear in gendered gestures; a woman who doffed her cap to someone she met in the street was engaging in two simultaneous forms of gender non-conforming behaviour. Similarly, the 'man-woman' of the 1620 pamphlet *Hic Mulier* was accused specifically of swapping female-coded for male-coded headwear, and the 1644 dialogue *A Looking-Glasse for Women* compared women in hats to 'Hermophrodite[s]' (Anon 1620, fols. A4r-A4v; T.H. 1644, fol. B4r). Accusations of wearing men's hats carried implications of sexual transgression, and Laura Gowing has identified a 1593 defamation case in which the epithets 'whor' and 'quean' were coupled with the mocking instruction 'putt of the white kerchief and putt on a flat capp' (Gowing 1993, p. 11; c.f. Anon 1620, fols. A4r-A4v).

This analysis has several implications for the curation and interpretation of the V&A hat, and of museum objects more broadly. First, the broad scope of the gendered analytical methodology demonstrates that the V&A's woollen cap provides a means of making visible the unacknowledged and largely unnamed female makers whose work is present throughout the museum. Secondly, it seems clear that the fact that this gendered economic history is not often made visible in museums is, in part, owing to the double bind of 'false universal' discourse. Women are often excluded both from references to 'cappers' and from formalised apprenticeship processes or guild membership in early modern documentary sources, which makes researching their labour a more difficult task, meaning that they are underrepresented in the historiographical and curatorial work on which museum interpretation is based. Relatedly, a reference to 'cappers' in museum interpretation—while technically gender-neutral—is still, owing to the weight of historiographical habit and the pervasive sexism of contemporary society, liable to be read by museum visitors as referring to men. Given that male is still too often perceived as neutral in contemporary discourse, while women's gender is specifically 'marked' (McConnell and Fazio 1996)—and given that public assumptions about the past still tend to minimise women's autonomy (Sturtevant and Kaufman forthcoming)—gender neutrality in museum interpretation risks failing to challenge the fact that past subjects are often presumed male until proven otherwise (Heyam 2019, p. 5).



Fig. 2. Sir Thomas Gresham by; after Francis Delaram; Unknown artist, D2811 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Thirdly, early modern hats can also contribute to the gendered diversification of museum interpretation, beyond increasing the visibility of women's history. Clearly, if hats like the V&A cap are presented simply as men's clothing (Fig. 2) in interpretation and/or object catalogues, this history of resistance to and disruption of gendered norms will remain underacknowledged. Indeed, this may even lead to curatorial misinterpretation. The V&A's catalogue text for another cap, object 1566-1901, notes that 'its size suggests it may have belonged to a young boy or an adult with a smallish head', without explicitly acknowledging that this may make female ownership more likely. Yet this observation has implications beyond recognising the history of how women have consistently defied the norms of gendered clothing and behaviour. The broad category of early modern people who were assigned female at birth and wore men's

hats is likely to have included people motivated by aesthetics or fashion, people seeking greater economic independence, people for whom male presentation provided safety in the street, people advertising their sexual availability to men, people seeking to attract women sexually through masculine presentation, and people for whom masculine expression was congruent with their own gendered subjectivity. It is important, then, that museum interpretation of objects like the V&A's cap, which have been used to facilitate gender nonconforming behaviour, avoids homogenising motivations for that behaviour. Some, but not all, of these people can be accurately described as 'women'; in order to make the 'trans possibility' of objects like this cap available to museum visitors, it is crucial to avoid fixing these past subjects in a single gendered identity category (Heyam 2019, p. 5).





Fig. 3. Frances, Countess of Somerset by Simon de Passe, National Portrait Gallery, London, D6807 © National Portrait Gallery, London

#### Case Study 2:

##### The Felt Hat from the Vasa Ship

While it is possible to trace the gendered history of the V&A cap back to its raw materials, a felt hat that survived underwater for more than 300 years that is now part of the Vasa Museum collection presents other practical problems: what methodology do you adopt when you know almost nothing about the object? Perhaps the best place to start is the context of the hat's survival. The felt hat, which belonged to an unknown sailor, was found in a chest on the wreckage of the Vasa ship (Fig. 4). The chest in which it was found would have been an important object to the sailor, as he would have kept all his belongings in it. He would have cleaned it, decorated it and used it for storing clothes, letters and other personal items. It would also have been used as furniture, such as a table or a chair. The hat, which was broad-brimmed with ribbons tied around it, was stored together with many other items: a thimble, a small knife, silk ribbons, wax, a comb,

two pairs of shoes, a wooden spoon, a tool, coins, a small keg and fragments of a purse (Kaijser 1988, p. 74). In other words, the chest is a time capsule of the everyday life of a seventeenth-century Swedish sailor.

Focussing on the hat, where does one begin in reconstructing its gendered history and meaning? What can we know about a hat that belonged to an unidentified owner? The Vasa Museum's collections database gives very limited information. From the search fields that are populated, it is thought that the hat *may* be made of beaver skin. However, without a chemical analysis of the object itself, a process that is costly and time-consuming, it is not certain. Therefore it is not possible to complete the gender biography of the hat from the object alone. Instead, analyses need to be extended and contextualised by other material artefacts among the contents of the ship.

Besides this hat, two other intact hats were found, as well as fragments of ten other hats. Two distinct types of hats are represented by this sample, both of them men's hats that were fashionable in Europe during the early 17th century. One type is characterised by a wide, broader brim—like the one in the chest—while the other features a high crown. These two distinct hat types were popular at the same time, although the one with the lower crown was a later style and remained in fashion for a longer period in the early 1600s (Ginsburg 1990, p. 46; Amphlett 2003 p. 106). Over the course of the 17th century, hats became smaller, with broad-brimmed hats with high crowns starting to disappear during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Madeleine Ginsburg points out that the wide-brimmed hat was difficult to wear; a man noted in 1616, 'Every puff of wind deprived us of them, requiring the employment of one hand to keep them on'. Clearly then, in battle, hats with wide brims were impractical, which may explain their decline in use (Ginsburg 1990, p. 46).

The Vasa database also gives us information on origin, suggesting that the hat might have come from the Netherlands. Knowing the origin is significant from a gender perspective, since hat-making in Europe was restricted as a male-only profession only in some areas. In 1649, hat-makers in Frankfurt refused to employ journeymen from the Hessian town Fulda because women were allowed to work in the industry there (Wiesner-Hanks 1986, pp. 151-8). The Netherlands seems to have been particularly open to letting women work in hat-making in the 1600s, with the result that German journeymen refused to travel there for fear of tainting their honour by working side-by-side with women (Stuart 1999, p. 214).

Information about this specific hat's origin does not reveal anything about whether its owner was Dutch or had travelled to the Low Countries. Hats were often inherited, passed from one generation to another, and there was an international second-hand market in clothing, a trade in which both men and women were involved throughout Europe (Bellavitis 2018, pp. 220-222; Deceulaer 2008, pp. 16-17; Wiesner-Hanks 1981, pp. 8-9). Several people may have owned the hat before, and it is also possible that hats were used as currency



at the time (Rimstad 2017, p. 74). Many traders accepted second-hand garments in exchange for new clothes (Lemire 2012, pp. 146, 148). Just as with other garments and accessories, hats were recycled and repurposed. A worn-out hat could, for example, become insoles for shoes (Rimstad 2017, p. 75). Unlike today, clothes and textiles had a high value and were often the most valuable thing a person owned. Garments were taken care of in order to ensure durability; they were often later bequeathed in wills and were reused as long as possible. Had the broad-brimmed Vasa hat not gone under with the ship in 1628, it would most likely have gone through a recycling process involving, at different stages, both men and women. Instead it was found and brought up when the boat was recovered, a rescuing process that was exclusively male, an activity in which women were prevented from taking part.

**F**elt hats of the type found in the Vasa chest were in fashion throughout the 1600s, and much can be gleaned about its gendered aspects by studying similar examples of this type. Some historians see the broad-brimmed hat as the first example of the trickle-up effect of cultural transmission. Traditionally, the predominant characteristic of the earliest fashion systems has been called a 'trickle-down' effect in fashion, whereby elite trends filtered downwards to the lower social orders. However, this type of broad-brimmed felt hat provides an example of how fashion spread from below, a process in fashion theory called the trickle-up effect, whereby fashions that began among the populace took root among the wealthy (Rimstad 2017, p. 77). Felt hats of this sort were typically worn by men in Sweden during the 1600s. However, this was not always the case; some women and other people assigned female at birth, especially within the upper echelons of society, donned felt hats. This was a part of the process through which fashion spread from men to women (Rimstad 2017, p. 72). Although the phenomenon is rare, some paintings show women—such as Danish King Christian IV's daughter Leonora Christina, Queen Mary of England (in 1633), Anne of Denmark (in 1617), and Isabella Brant (wife of the artist Peter Paul Rubens, in 1610)—wearing felt hats (Rimstad 2017, p. 74; Ginsburg 1990, p. 45). Perhaps the most famous example is the portrait of Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689), daughter of



Fig. 4. Sailor's felt hat from the Vasa Ship, c.1628. © Vasamuseet

Gustavus Adolphus, who commissioned the Vasa, wearing a hat with a broad brim and high crown while riding a horse. These women all had a high cultural, social and economic status, and all the hats that they are portrayed in are of male style and fashion. It is possible that their elevated positions meant they could don such hats without diminishing their femininity.

**W**omen adopting men's fashion was not new or unusual. At the end of the 1500s, for example, hunting and riding became popular among women, resulting in their use of functional male garments such as jackets, waistcoats and hats (Saccardi 2018, p. 60). The spread of male fashion to female wardrobes thus had two explanations. First, high-status women adopted male fashions to show their importance and probably had more freedom to experiment with fashion. Wearing men's attributes could threaten their femininity, but their economic and social status gave them more space to challenge the gender division in fashion (Fig. 3). The other explanation is functional—that elite women started to adopt male interests, creating a need for more functional clothes. An intersectional perspective reveals that class and gender interact and can explain how fashion works.

**A**nother clue for decoding the gendered dimension of hats is decorations, which were commonplace in the 1600s as a means of showing status or personal taste. Decorations might include ribbons, pearls, feathers and even gloves tucked into hatbands (Rimstad 2017, p. 75). The sailor's hat from the Vasa ship had two silk ribbons—a sign of female involvement in its production,

since women would have been involved in this aspect of its manufacture—and one of them was tied in a bow (Kaijser 1982, p. 74). Sailors often decorated their hats, embellishing them with ribbons or buttons to make them more personalised (Lemire 2016, p. 5). The brims were broad and were often held up by brooches (Lester and Oerke 2004, p. 26; Rangström 2002, p. 65). At the end of the century, feathers became more popular in both female and male hats, although most people used simpler decorations (Morris, Lester and Oerke 2004, p. 27).

**I**n the 1600s, there was a public debate about luxury fashion and the immorality of wearing luxurious garments, particularly by women, because it indicated that they might be frivolous or immodest. Unsurprisingly, decorated hats came under discussion. Not everyone liked the fashion of wearing hats. Johannes Johannis Rudbeckius, who founded the first Swedish secondary school, Rudbeckianska Gymnasiet, in 1623, had strict rules for the students. He disliked opulence and was against pointed hats (Norlin 1869, p. 163).

**D**ecorations might perform other functions as well, including more personal communication. For example, the Swedish aristocrat Sten Sture, who was regent during the period 1512-1520, wore a small silk glove in his hat ribbon during a naval battle. The glove was a gift from his wife-to-be (Rangström 2002, pp. 47-48), worn perhaps as a token of affection or memento to bring him luck. The hat band on the Vasa hat may then have served several different purposes, including decoration, a memento or a means of keeping the hat in the right shape.



During the 1600s, clothes were central to the ways in which gender was communicated visually and materially. Hats, and the way they were worn, have been read as a way of expressing masculinity (Stadin 2005, p. 43). Furthermore, it is possible that decorative elements, such as the bows on the Vasa hat, were used to signify masculinity. While bows are not associated with manliness today, gender was displayed differently during the 1600s.

Even though much is unknown about the hat in the Vasa collection, the gendered interpretation of hats—as well as many other objects found on the ship—help make visible a broader historical context of Vasa. For one, it opens a discussion about how masculinities and femininities were negotiated and expressed through fashion, materiality and objects in a European military state like Sweden at the time. Secondly, the gendering of objects highlights how the aggressive actions of the Swedish state sometimes forced the breach of what was seen as ideal patriarchal norms; women from all social groups became household heads when husbands went to war, were disabled or died and thus could become important agents in business and politics. This builds on work that has already started at the museum to make visible women who were active as owners, managers or workers in mills, mines and the timber trade. And thirdly, by using the gendering method applied here, the Vasa and Sweden are set in a gendered global context. Knowing that a vast majority of visitors to the museum come from other countries makes the story of a Swedish warship also a part of some of their history. The Vasa Museum has for a long time worked towards using the ship as a keyhole into not only Swedish but also global early modern history. The gendering of objects—analytically, curatorially and in museum interpretation—will be one important aspect of these efforts.

Until recently, museums mostly got away with presenting gender-blind exhibitions to an audience that most often did not expect, or perhaps in many cases even want, anything else. A need to attract new and wider groups of visitors has increased an interest in seeking to become more relevant to groups who visit museums less frequently, while simultaneously sustaining repeat visits from existing visitors. There is empirical evidence that if people feel more

represented or comfortable in museums, they are more likely to visit them, and this extends to marginalised groups who feel more positively about museums if their history is represented (Dodd 2002, pp. 43–44; Newman and McLean 2006, pp. 59, 62–63; McCall 2009, p. 321). As Darryl McIntyre has argued, ‘sub-groups of the LGBTQ communities may respond positively to their acknowledgement within mainstream institutions and establish lasting or continuing connections if involved with museum practice’ (McIntyre 2007, p. 50). In this manner, this project is about making museums more relevant and inclusive by revealing the fuller stories behind museum objects.

By applying a gendered analysis to objects at the V&A and Vasa Museums, we not only wish to make visible the gendered aspects that made an object meaningful to early modern people but also to recover the gendered impact and significance of the object in its broadest sense, within and beyond the society it was made for. Moreover, we want to provide a meaningful basis for conducting the research necessary to diversify gendered representation within the museum. The implementation of the interpretative methodology has revealed both the possibilities that lay therein—as shown by the case studies above—and the challenges museums face when trying to integrate gender analysis into their existing procedures. One such issue relates to cataloguing as an aspect of curatorial practice. Museums face the burden of a gender-biased organisational history; most cataloguing, as well as previous object research, was done at a time when gender analysis was not considered important, resulting in the existing knowledge being at best limited and at worst misleading or inaccurate. To integrate gender in a museum thus means having to start from the beginning.

This project has shown that thorough gender integration is a long-term commitment whose success relies upon the involvement of all departments in a museum, including curators, educators, guides, researchers and communicators. It is not just about new research on specific objects but also about making this new knowledge available through different channels to staff as well as external museum experts and visitors. Besides the obvious need for new research, this also includes labelling objects in new ways to make them searchable,

re-writing guide manuals and educational materials, and textual information while re-thinking how the museum communicates its exhibitions to its visitors. In order to make this work in a holistic way, staff from across the museum have to be part of the integration process. This worked very differently in the two museums presented here because of their different sizes and set-ups. The Vasa is a highly unified museum, which gave it the benefit of mobilising the entire institution behind the project, from the director to the research team and other departments. In contrast, the V&A’s vast size necessitated a different approach and required working with the research department, specific curatorial teams and the LGBTQ group, who provided expertise and cross-institutional collaboration.

The decision at the Vasa Museum to open a temporary exhibition called *Vasa’s Women* was both a result of raising awareness of the importance of gender and a starting point for a more thorough integration process—which is part of this project. Instead of showing the Vasa warship as just a warship—commissioned by the warrior King Gustavus Adolphus and intended to send men into war against other men—, a new interest arose in telling a fuller story about the ship and its societal context. Thus emerged the stories of the shipyard’s female manager, the many female suppliers of timber, the women who owned iron mills where cannonballs were manufactured, and not least the women who went down with the ship as it sank in 1628. As a result, visitors will in the future—through various means such as new guides and visitors’ manuals, online information, educational practice, pop-ups and public talks—not only meet a gendered story about a hat, but also, among other things, the gendered histories about a dress, the many wooden figures that decorated the ship, games played on the ship and even the vessel’s cannonballs. At a workshop bringing together people from all departments at the Vasa Museum, every department put forward how they wished to take this further and make gendered objects visible and active agents in their work. Objects such as cannonballs, with seemingly little history to tell and even less to say about gender, will in various ways, through the work of all departments, open up a history of women and men, femininities and masculinities.

**A**t the V&A, a cross-museum workshop was held to stimulate interest in and facilitate implementation of gendered analysis, curation and interpretation. Feedback from attendees demonstrated the impact of our methodology; staff with responsibility for cataloguing were convinced of the need for 'greater exposure of female designers and makers', while a volunteer tour guide for the existing 'Female Voices' tours commented that the methodology 'gave me a clear direction as to how I can improve my work, especially by giving me a technique for gendering' (anonymous

feedback, V&A 'Work in Progress' seminar, 25 June 2019). A follow-up in-depth workshop was held with staff responsible for re-interpreting the museum's permanent fashion gallery, where we discussed implementing greater visibility for unknown female makers and a new focus on the use of clothing to express gender nonconformity.

**D**iscrete events at museums such as Queen's House (London) and at Powderham Castle in Devon have already demonstrated the applicability of our gendered methodology to analysis

and interpretation beyond the V&A and Vasa, and we hope to be able to facilitate its further adoption. The application of gendered analysis which studies materiality, production, use, re-use, design and interpretation offers museums a number of opportunities, and as these case studies demonstrate, textile objects represent a particularly productive starting point in this process.

**A**ttention to the materiality of textile objects has the potential to transform not just the interpretation of individual objects, but the interpretation of entire museum collections. Every object with woollen, spun or woven elements has an unacknowledged history of poorly-paid female labour as well as of women involved in trade and the distribution of goods; when combined with recent research into the importance of women's labour and investment in the silk industry, this methodology invites a wholesale gendered reassessment of costume collections. In the case of objects containing flax—including embroideries on linen canvas—the working bodies of these women are even more integral; early modern flax-spinning frequently involved the application of saliva to moisten the thread and keep it pliable (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 105), meaning that the bodily traces of early modern women may remain, unseen, in many museum collections. More broadly, given the importance of female labour to the wool trade, museum objects that were originally purchased or commissioned by medieval or early modern wool merchants can be said to rely on women's labour; this is also true of historic properties. Alongside this important opportunity to re-evaluate and reveal the centrality of women's work in shaping museum collections, the cases of these two hats also demonstrate the importance of asking questions—both in research and in interpretation—about what happened when the gendered rules surrounding objects were broken. Gendering objects is not just about making visible gendered conventions or stereotypes whose significance has been forgotten; it is also a much-needed opportunity to diversify our sense of gendered behaviour in the past and to recover histories that will resonate with trans and gender nonconforming visitors. This group, whose history is still largely absent from museums—and particularly from the representation of pre-20th century history—is still marginalised in contemporary society and thus stands to benefit substantially from museum representation, both in terms of its potential to combat social isolation and its capacity to undermine politicised claims that the trans experience is a recent phenomenon (Heyam 2019, pp. 8-9). Finally, by using our gendered analytical methodology, museum objects such as these two hats can be placed in a global context. An object itself, the material, or part of it was sometimes imported and thus offers the large group of visitors from all over the world—at the Vasa no less than 80% of all visitors come from abroad—a gendered history involving not only Britain or Sweden. The growing consensus concerning the social agency of museums makes the diversification of gendered interpretation, in terms of both women's history and queer history, an increasingly urgent task; the case studies presented here demonstrate the potential of everyday objects to facilitate this aim.



## NOTES

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